The Fourth Church Pulpit

WORK FOR ALL TO DO

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John M. Buchanan

Perhaps we should revive Luther's vision of the priesthood of all believers.... It is a vision that requires a rich and disciplined imagination ... To believe in one's own priesthood is to see the extraordinary dimensions of an ordinary life, to see the hand of God at work in the world and to see one's own hands as necessary to that work. Whether those hands are diapering an infant, assembling an automobile or balancing a corporate account, they are God's hands, claimed by God at baptism for the accomplishment of God's will on earth.

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"To each is given the manifestation
of the Spirit for the common good."
I Corinthians 12:7 [NRSV]

On the night of April 7, 1805, Meriwether Lewis wrote an unusually eloquent and poignant journal entry. He was in his buffalo skin tepee, in the what is now central North Dakota, where the Knife River joins the Missouri. That day his tiny expedition headed into a wilderness no European American had ever seen before. A large keel boat, which has served to carry supplies, weapons, ammunition, food and a secure place from attack, was turned around and sent back down the river to St. Louis. The little band would head for the Pacific Ocean alone.

Lewis wrote:

> "Our vessels consisted of six small canoes (and two larger row boats). This little fleet, altho' not quite so rispectable (*sic*) as those of Columbus, or Captain Cook, were still viewed by us with as much pleasure as those disernedly (sic) famed adventures ever suffered theirs: and I dare say with as much anxiety for their safety and preservation. We were now about to penetrate a country at least two thousand miles in width, on which the foot of civilized men had never trodden: the good or evil it had in store for us was for experience to determine, and these little vessels contained every article by which we were to expect to subsist or defend ourselves."

And then Lewis became reflective, writing by candle light in his tepee on the edge of the unknown:

> "The picture which now presented itself to me was a most pleasing one, entertaining as I do, the most confident hope of succeading (sic) in a voyage which had formed a darling project of mine for the last ten years, I could but esteem this moment of my departure as among the most happy of my life." [Stephen E. Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage*, New York, Simon and Schuster, NY, 1996, p. 212]

Lewis should, however, have been scared to death. It is hard to imagine a more fragile or vulnerable project. What impressed me about his journal entry is its expression of pleasure. Lewis was happy watching all visible means of support, all security, all contact with the world, sail down the river. It's almost as if he knew that it was the defining moment in his life: a convergence of huge dynamics — his particular gifts, and a specific situation, a need, a challenge, which required his gifts. It's almost as if Lewis knew that his being there, leading the exploring party into the new Louisiana Purchase on behalf of Thomas Jefferson and the American government was why he had been born, the very purpose of his life. It's almost as if Lewis knew, in that moment of radical abandonment, radical trust, knew his calling, his vocation. "I could esteem this moment as among the most happy of my life."

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It is one of the most intriguing ideas in Christian religion. "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good," Paul wrote to an early Christian community in the Greek city of Corinth. There is work for each to do, particular work to which God calls a person, work which requires the particular gifts and skills God has given.

Is there a more important topic for any of us than this? Is there a more critical question than knowing what one is supposed to do with one's life, knowing why we are here and what God wants us to do with our lives; or, to put it in the language of faith, is there a more important topic than identifying our vocation and then doing it?

James Fowler, Professor of Theology and Human Development at Emory University, thinks that this idea of Paul's that each of us has been called to some vocation is at the heart of our faith experience. "Vocation," he says, "is bigger than job or occupation or career. Vocation refers to the centering commitments and vision that shape what our lives are really about." [The Chicago Sunday Evening Club, 1/7/96]

Barbara Brown Taylor, in an essay on the subject of "Vocation," tells about struggling, as many of us did and still do, with the topic of what to do with our lives, weighing all the alternatives, and vacillating back and forth, from this path and possibly to that, and finally, one weary midnight praying out loud to God to simply tell her what to do.

She says she heard a voice that said:

> "'Anything that pleases you.' 'What,' I said, waking up. 'What kind of answer is that?' 'Do anything that pleases you,' the voice in my head said again, 'and belong to me.' That simplified things considerably," Taylor wrote. 'I could pump gas in Idaho or dig latrines on Pago Pago, as far as God was concerned, as long as I remembered whose I was." [*The Preaching Life*, p. 23]

How do you know what to do? Sometimes it is clear. Mostly, I think it is not, or perhaps it is but we insist on complicating it or listening to other voices than God's. And sometimes, I think, guidance comes in the form of disappointment and failure and rejection. It is an old Quaker tradition that if you wait patiently and trust God, "way will become clear." Parker Palmer, who is a Quaker, remembers his terminal impatience in his mid-thirties to decide what he wanted to do with his life. He sought the counsel of a mature Quaker woman who gave him some very wise advice:

> "I'm a birthright friend and in sixty-plus years of living, way has never opened in front of me ... But a lot of way has closed behind me, and that has had the same guiding effect."

Palmer says it was a great relief when he could finally acknowledge his limits and the truth that he could not be anything he wanted to be.

> "I cannot and will not be President," he admits. "But I do not grieve that particular limitation, for I cannot imagine a more gruesome assignment for a person of my makeup to be president of anything ... There is as much guidance from God in what does not happen and cannot happen in my life as there is in what can and does happen, maybe more." [*Weavings*, "On Minding Your Call When No One is Calling," May/June 1996, p. 16]

That, I confess, has been my experience. And I know that my experience is not particularly unique.

> "There is as much guidance from God in what does not happen ... as there is in what can and does happen, maybe more."

Occasionally I find myself wondering about how it is that I or any of us end up being who we are and where we are. And as I do my personal audit, I conclude that an important part of the picture, maybe the critical part is a series of "noes," or near misses, disappointments at the time which turned out, in a strange way, to be "yeses" to what really mattered.

When it became painfully obvious that I was not going to play center field for the Pittsburgh Pirates, I turned to my second love — music, and, a sophomore in high school, made an appointment with the band director I loved and who was a kind of mentor and who appreciated my gifts and gave me opportunities for leadership. I told him that I wanted to be a musician like him. And in a conversation I will never forget, he told me I was a good musician but not good enough and that I ought to enjoy music but look somewhere else for a profession. I was devastated. I thought he'd be overjoyed. It was one of the most important conversations in my life.

Two years later, I had decided on another option: this time the U.S. Navy decided my eyes weren't good enough for flight school. I was disappointed.

There are others, as I think about it, but, hardest of all, after one year in Divinity School, I still didn't know with enough certainty what I wanted to do, and so, impatient to get on with my life, applied for admission to a doctoral program in education. It was an exciting new program at Johns Hopkins, focusing on administration. Perfect, I thought. They thought I looked good, too. They sent someone to talk to me and close the deal: full fellowship,